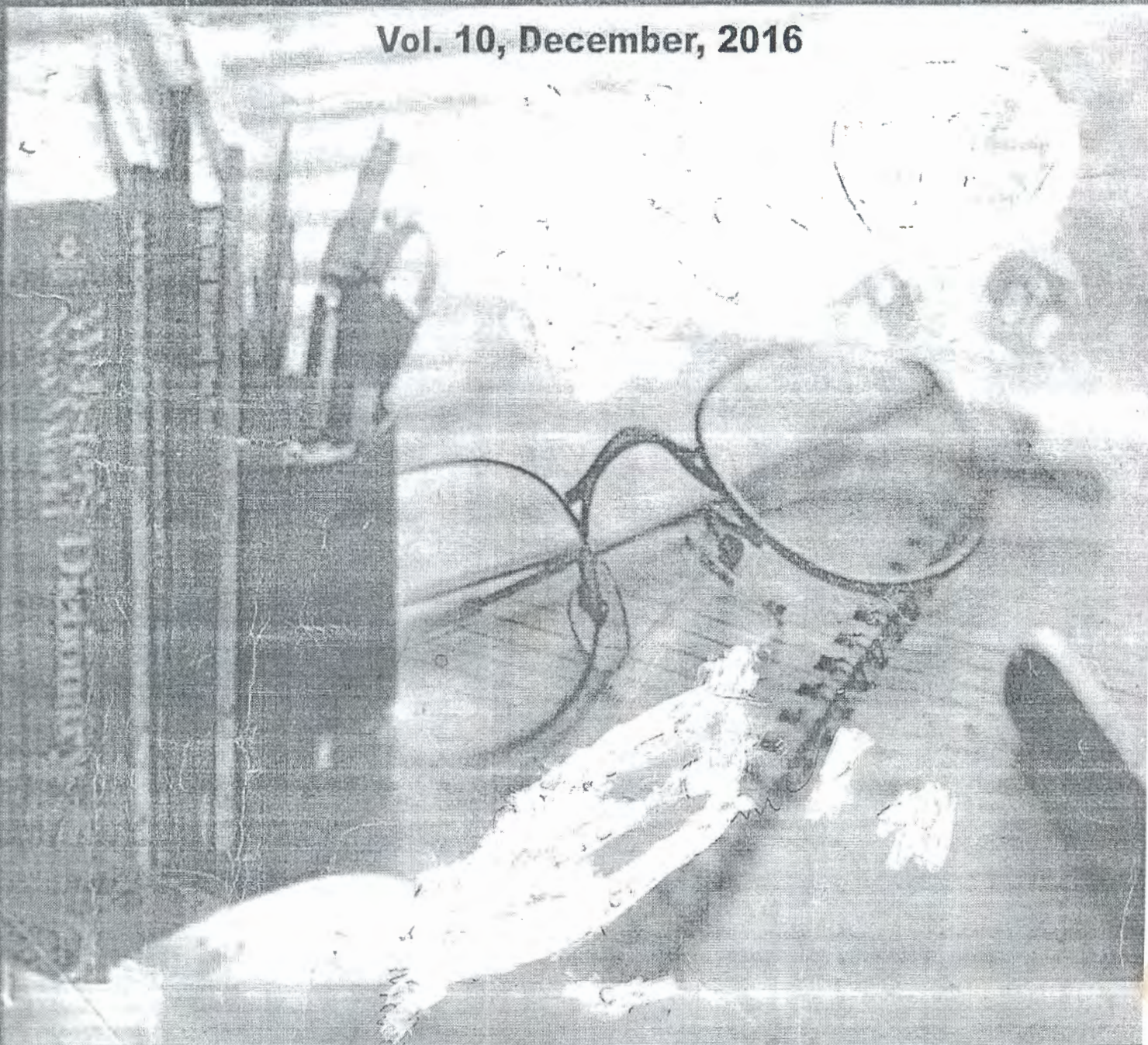


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# Use of Competitive Intelligence on Improvement of Registry Services in Nigerian Private University System

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## Abstract

*The university registry is one of the central support service departments in the university providing support for the academic purposes of the university with a range of services known as academic administration. The academic administration includes support for the admission process for students, record management for both current and past students and other records, award / degree ceremonies and career advice. As a regulator within the university, the registry assists in the interpretation and application of rules and regulations. For the university registry to succeed, quality information delivery is very essential, more so, in this age and time when competition has become serious and powerful among private universities. The increase in the number of private universities established in Nigeria today compared to the number of available students that can afford private university education and coupled with the fact that the students now have many options opened to them, has made private universities to start looking for ways to attract, retain and foster stronger relationships with students. Seeking sources of revenue has become a constant pressure and identifying opportunities for growth and strategic positioning is now essential to survival of these universities. Therefore, for private universities to survive in this competitive environment, a better understanding of its competition and competitive forces which affects its success is needed. One important approach that has helped organizations to succeed is Competitive Intelligence (CI) which the private universities could use to gain advantage over its competitors. This paper proposes that the private university registry could make use of the Keisser 2002 ten steps of CI process to identify its strengths, and weaknesses and subsequently employ strategies to improve its information service delivery thereby gaining competitive advantage over its competitors.*

**Keywords:** Competitive Intelligence, private university registry, information delivery, quality service, competition, competitive advantage

## Introduction

In all higher institutions around the world, the academic registry is one of the most important departments in the university community. According to the University of Bath, United Kingdom, the registry is one of the central support service departments providing support for the academic purposes of the university with a range of services which is often known as academic administration. This academic administration stretches from support for the recruitment and admission of students, through record-keeping for most of the activities of current students, to award ceremonies and career advice. It also involves support for systems and processes which underpin academic administration, for the structures of academic programmes and for records management within the university. As an academic community, the university is a highly critical and meticulous community that strives to maintain high standards and excellence, therefore the support services rendered by the registry department, the recordings of decisions and proceedings of the various committees and the volume of correspondence disseminated, must always aim at being of the highest quality and of being better than the best.

The registry strives to maintain the balance between supporting existing quality services and solutions while exploring, developing and utilizing technological advances and opportunities. In order to achieve organizational goals and objectives, the registry collaborates with other units or departments to provide a continuum of services to students and also support services to the university community. Therefore, for the registry to continue to render reliable, efficient and co-ordinated services in the

face of changing environment, strategies needs to be put in place and for this to take place, the competitive intelligence approach can be employed to know the strengths and weaknesses of the registry and also to know the threats and opportunities that abound in the environment of the institution.

The strategic and competitive Intelligence professionals (SCIP) organization as cited in sharp (2009) defines competitive Intelligence (CI) as a necessary, ethical business discipline for decision making based on understanding the competitive environment. It is the process by which organizations gather actionable information about competitors and apply it to their short and long term strategic planning (Ettorree, 1995). It involves the legal collection of information on competitors and the overall business environment. CI pulls together data and information from a very large and strategic view, allowing one to predict or forecast what is going to happen and this in turn allow organisations to effectively strategize in relation to the institution's competitive environment. Due to globalization, economic downturn and competition for revenue, higher private educational institutions now compete with one another for customers (students) and even for faculty. Public universities rely on public funding for growth, maintenance and expansion and even scholarship for their students and therefore do not need competition while private universities rely on the school fees of their students and goodwill of stakeholders for growth and development. This has invariably made competition among private universities to become more intense so as to be able to grow and expand.

## The University Registry and It's Services

The registry plays a prominent role in the academic life of any given university. The university registry with the Registrar at the head and the chief Administrative Officer has a dual role or function of assisting the Vice-Chancellor in the day to day running of the university and as secretary of the statutory bodies of the university as well as the various committees and ad-hoc committees such as senate, council, congregation, convocation among others. As a service centre, the registry serves the statutory bodies, the entire university community and the public generally having the main goal of rendering efficient and effective service to everyone. Basically and fundamentally, the role of University Registry in any university setting are enumerated to be the following:

- Admission process for all students into degree and non-degree programmes
- Manual and online registration of all students
- Coordination of all university examinations
- Manual and online student's records management
- Custodian of all university rules and regulations, policies and decisions and supports the implementation and proper compliance of such rules by both staff and students
- Secretariat for major university committees such as Senate, Administrative Committee, Academic congregation, University Council, Student Disciplinary committees and other Ad-hoc committees
- Liaises on behalf of the university with other bodies such as Joint Admissions and

Matriculation Board (JAMB), Nigerian University Commission (NUC) and so on.

- Provides career advisory service to students that is, career guidance for students on courses to select so that they can benefit from their programme

From the above, it is obvious that the university registry is a service centre servicing specifically not only the statutory bodies and their committees but the entire university community dealing on a daily basis with a considerable number of other departments as it performs its duties and the general public. These services if well coordinated, helps the registry to perform its important role of providing quality information services and other services to students, faculty, staff and the general public. It is therefore important that the services rendered by the registry are quickly carried out with precision at all times since the main goal of the department is to render efficient and effective information service (Okonta, 2012).

It is also important that the staff of the registry know all details about their work and work place, the rules and regulations of the university governing academic matters like examinations, discipline, admissions, registration and conditions of service, university policies and the university itself. The registry staff should always act as data banks where accurate information is stored, retrieved, shared and disseminated to everyone (Okonta, 2012). Within the university, the registry's customers are the current students, academic departments, other administrative and support departments, senior managers/committees of the university. Outside the university, registry's customers are potential applicants, their

parents/families, advisors, other schools and colleges, graduates/former students, other universities, employers, government and official bodies or agencies.

### Quality Information Services for Private University Registry

The academic registry is responsible for providing critical services to support education in the university and some of these services have been enumerated above. However, in providing these services to meet the aims and objectives of the university, the registry must ensure that the staff are intelligent men and women who are professionally and academically equipped or qualified for their jobs in order to cope with the academic nature of university administration. These services rendered with the greatest humility must be well coordinated so as to ensure student, faculty/staff and public satisfaction through quality/excellent academic administration service and information delivery.

In recent years, the environment of university education has undergone a dramatic change and the number of universities has increased especially private universities, so also the number of students seeking university education. With the increased number of students, private universities are now competing to attract more students, and the students on the other hand have many options available to them to choose from, therefore the factors that enable universities to be able to attract and retain students should be seriously studied (Hasan, Ilias, Rahman & Razak, 2008). That is, there is need for private higher institutions to begin to seek out effective and creative ways to foster stronger relationships with their students. As a

result, as Teo, 2011 argues it in Hasan, Ilias, Rahman & Razak (2008) competition to woo as many potential customers (students) as possible may become harder or more intense, more so as private universities do not have the opportunity to receive any subsidiary or financial assistance from the government as do the public university. However, Public universities are also struggling to have more students as government subventions alone cannot cater for the needs of the universities.

Service has been defined by Lovelock (1999) in Gudlaugsson (2010) as plan, process and performance. Plan here refers to service as a promise, that is, someone plans to do something for another. The delivery of the service usually takes some time and therefore involves actions which form a process and then the quality of service is assessed based on the performance of employees most times. Universities admit or appeal to students based on plan, the student studies are a process which last for some years and the students assesses the quality of the service rendered based on the performance of teachers, other staff and themselves. For the university registry, the service rendered is information delivery.

Quality as defined by Reeves and Bednar, (1994) in Akter, D'Ambra and Ray, (2010), states that it is either excellence or value or conformance with specifications or meeting expectations. All these, according to Nelson, Todd, and Wixom (2005) are interrelated and all play crucial role to shape consumer's perceptions. As higher education provision is a service and students are expected to pay for their educational expenses which are usually higher in private than public universities, the students which are the customers of these

institutions look for evidence of service quality before making their choice and this confirms the importance of service quality in a university context (Sultan, 2013). For a university registry, the quality of service rendered is very important because of the different types of customers the registry staff encounter on a daily basis such as parents, students, government officials, other official bodies, graduates and other universities. Usually, as the saying goes, the first impression may or can last for a life time. *Service quality is generally perceived to be a tool which can be used to create a competitive advantage for an organization.*

Service quality has been defined as a consumer attitude reflecting the perceived overall superiority and excellence in the process and outcome of a service provider (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988). They also define it as a function of the differences between expectation and performance along the quality dimensions while Bitner, (1990) defines service quality as the consumers' overall impression of the relative inferiority or superiority of the organization and its services. The most common definition of quality is the discrepancy or difference between consumer's expectation and perceptions of the service received. Therefore service quality is defined as how well a delivered service level matches customer's expectations. Also, perceived service quality is measured by subtracting customer perception scores from customer expectation scores both for each dimension and overall (Han, 2004).

#### University Registry Services Prior to Competitive Intelligence process in education

Prior to the growth of private universities

when there were just a few of them in the country, *competition for students was not high because the few available concentrated on improving the quality of information delivery to their students and resources to run a private university were adequate.* Also, there were no threats to the growth of these universities from the external environment. During this period, the private university registries tried to improve on the poor image and other weaknesses of the public universities due to the high price paid by the students for private education. Unlike the public universities, the private universities were viewed as more receptive to students, more responsive to market demand more innovative and more flexible in their course offerings (Azizi, Elezi and Mazreku, 2013). The private university registries have tried to bridge the barrier caused by the public universities between the staff and students, staff and customers and the general public. They have tried to promote good customer relations with their customers and potential customer while rendering better information services to their students. The private university registries did not compete with others prior to their increase in number nor tried to gain information to use against others but rather looked for ways to satisfy their students. In summary, the private university registry have tried to look for ways to provide quality information service delivery for its customers whereby erasing the unpleasant experience of the public universities thus justifying the high cost of private education.

#### Competition in Private Universities

In time past, universities in many countries were dependent on public funding for growth and expansion. However, the financial downturn as a

...of economic crisis and the structural adjustment programme of the 1980s, gradually reduced the ability of government or the public sector to provide adequate and continued funding support for the various educational levels of education and mainly the higher educational level. In addition to this, there was a rising demand for higher education among the youth. To meet up with this demand, several governments resolved to encouragement and promotion of private initiatives as a strategy to help contain the huge demand for higher education (Abagi, 2005).

Today, the private sector is the fastest growing sector in higher education in many countries including Nigeria. In recent times, the number of private universities has increased in Nigeria and this has made the competition to be more intense with students having many options available to choose from (Hasan, et al. 2008). Market friendly reforms in the developing nations are also creating positive conditions that enable the growth and expansion of the private sector/institutions. These private initiatives are established by private organizations, philanthropic, religious and also profit oriented private agencies (Abagi, 2005). They are self-financing and their main source of income is student school fees. Therefore, the competition to attract as many students (potential customers) as possible has become more intense. In Nigeria, the private universities are profit oriented striving to grow, make money and succeed.

Due to the quest for education in the western part of the country and the high commercial activities, most of the private universities are situated in the south west region of the country and this therefore makes competition for students,

teachers and other resources more intense. This is more so because even though government owned universities have better remuneration packages for faculty and relatively low tuition fees, incessant strikes which causes unstable academic calendar, poor infrastructure and low staff commitment affects the quality of information delivery to students who are the main customers of these public universities. This situation now forces parents and other stakeholders to look to the private institutions. However, the cost of private education is high and only a few can afford it. This invariably means the increasing number of private universities have to struggle or strive to attract the few customers that can afford their fees. Therefore, there is need for these private universities to begin to strategize and seek out effective and creative ways to attract, retain and foster stronger relationships with student (customers) so that they can meet up with their needs, remain successful and grow.

To understand the nature of competition further, Murphy (2005) used Michael Porter's competitive strategy published in 1980 to illustrate how organizations compete. The model has three dimensions namely: price, differentiation of the product or service from its competitors and customer focus (concentrating upon meeting the needs of specific groups of customers).

**Price:** - Private Universities like business organizations can use price advantage as a powerful weapon of winning success. Private universities can use price to attract more customers (students) by either lowering the cost of their information products or the use of bargaining with customers.

**Differentiation of product or service:** - This is

another way organizations are using to compete. That is, by differentiating their product from others. Private universities can use this method to differentiate their products from that of their competitors to gain advantage. This can include the use of technology, also repackaging of other products to gain advantage over its competitors.

**Customer Focus:** - This involves not trying to sell to the whole world but focusing an organisation's product on a specific market. Selling to the world is very costly, it takes a longer time to achieve and difficult too. Whereas if a particular geographical area is targeted, a higher percentage return on investment may be realized faster and easily. Private universities can use this model or method by concentrating on only the courses or programmes they can handle successfully instead of having a wide range of course/programmes which the university might not be able to effectively manage in terms of faculty, staff and students. In such case a high percentage return on investment may not be realized and can also affect information service delivery to customers.

### Competitive Intelligence

Due to the fact that we now live in a world that is driven by hyper competition because providers of goods and services are more than the demand for the goods and services (Nikolaos, 2012), that is, businesses are more than the demand, competition for survival has become very intense. As mentioned before, there are more private universities in the south western part of the country than the number of available customers (students). Therefore, for private universities to survive in such

an intensely competitive environment there is need for a good understanding of the competition and the competitive forces that affects their success (Nikolaos, 2012). They must know how to anticipate and react to changes in and out of their organization and also remain competitive. To achieve this, the organization should put in place a process of turning information (increased knowledge) into actionable intelligence that will help to make strategic decisions. Using such knowledge to manage in this hyper competitive environment is called Competitive Intelligence (CI). Competitive intelligence is a process of giving someone insights into what might happen in the near future (Evans, undated). According to him, competitive intelligence (CI) pulls together data and information from a large and strategic viewpoint and allows you to predict or forecast what is going to happen. This in turn allows one to effectively strategize in relations to one's competitive environment. This means, CI allows you to remain competitive by improving your strategic decisions which leads to better performance against one's competitors. CI goes beyond simple research but rather attempts to answer specific critical questions that can impact the organization.

The strategic and competitive intelligence Professionals (SCIP) defines CI as a necessary, ethical business discipline for decision making based on understanding the competitive environment (cited in Sharp, 2009). They also define CI as a systematic and ethical program for gathering, analyzing and managing external information that can affect your company's plans, decisions and operations. CI is gathering, analysis and putting it to work (Murphy, 2005). It involves



the legal collection of information on competitors and the overall business environment. The knowledge gained from this information is then used to enhance the organization's own competitiveness. CI is a management discipline that enables executives to make smarter, more successful decisions, thereby minimizing risk, avoiding being blind-sighted and getting it right the first time (Nikolaos, 2012). Effective CI is a process which involves the gathering of raw data, matching the data to create information and the analysis of the information to support the new decision and changes in strategy (Nikolaos, 2012).

Competitive intelligence is a business tool which can make a significant contribution to the strategic management process in modern business organizations. However, private universities have become a constant seeker of revenue, looking for ways to grow, make money and succeed thereby acting more business-like. In today's competitive academic environment where students have many options of private universities to choose from, these higher institutions need to desperately search for effective and creative ways to gain competitive edge in the face of the emerging threats (shrinking enrolment, rising costs, demographic changes and so on). Invariably, these universities not only respond to threats in the environment but also seek to become more engaged with their stakeholders and relevant to their communities and constituencies. Therefore, CI activities become even more important in higher education (Hughes and White, 2005).

## Use of Competitive Intelligence process to improve Private University Registry Services

Competitive Intelligence as defined by Pellissier, (2013) is a process that produces and disseminates actionable intelligence by planning, ethically and legally collecting, processing and analyzing information from and about the internal and external or competitive environment in order to help decision makers in decision making and to provide a competitive advantage to the enterprise/institution. The overall objective of CI is to help strategists understand the forces that influence the business environment thereby developing appropriate plans to compete successfully. According to Keisser, (2002) ten (10) steps for the CI process for libraries was proposed which are:

**Step 1:-** Identify your competition. For the private universities to identify their competitors, they have to know them, that is, both current and potential competitors and also know where they are located or possible location, their size, the products and services they offer, what extra information services they offer and method of offering to their customers, why they are so successful and so on.

**Step 2:-** Select the qualitative and quantitative information. Here, you select the information that is needed to adequately assess your competitors such as their strengths, weakness and strategies. Having an understanding of such information about competitors will help private universities to understand or assess its own strength, weakness, opportunities and threats. Thus, the university can consolidate on its strengths and then strategize to improve on its weakness, and make use of opportunities not yet identified by its competitors

while turning its threats into opportunities.

**Step 3:- Collecting data.** This involves identifying the different methods of data collection on competitors and this can be done by:-

- Identifying papers presented at conferences by staff of main competitors
- Searching databases for articles written by them and read any articles written about competitors mentioning their information operations.
- Conducting a formal survey, or hire professionals to do it (particularly useful in obtaining compensation range data)
- Networking with other academic registries for personnel data
- Reading competitors school bulletin, brochures and internal publications concerning registry services provision.
- Visiting their web pages
- Visiting competitors work place (registry office) to see how they deliver their services

**Step 4:- Assign responsibilities.** This means to gather information and provide initial analysis, it is important that the private university registry involves all the staff of registry. Creating awareness of the competitive environment in which the university has found itself will help registry staff to better desire change and appreciate the need to create new products and services thereby improving the way they perform their duties.

**Step 5:- Organize and integrate the information.** Here the private university registry should organize the information gathered and share it with registry staff and other professionals within the university community. Also the information gathered is integrated into the daily activities of the registry and

evaluation of the services rendered is done to see how well the new changes in products and services have performed and thereby strategically plan for the future.

**Step 6:- Benchmarking.** This is a process of measuring and comparing an institution's business or work process against identified competitors or top performing organizations in order to find areas of improvement (Nikolaos, 2012). This is applicable for private universities that have the same offering, that is, similar processes, comparing the results and processes of those studied to one's own results. Benchmarking enables an institution to learn how well it's rival perform and then increase its own performance by adopting the best practices over and above that of the competitors.

**Step 7:- Gather your staff for regular scheduled discussions.** Now that the registry staff understand the strength, weaknesses and how the competitor operates, the university registry should identify the opportunities and resources available and also develop new strategies or use the same strategies the competitor uses to deliver its services to her target market. The staff should also discuss/deliberate on issues like what attracts customers to their competitors and identify areas in which their own organization is stronger.

**Step 8:- Devise your plan of action.** Using the results of CI process, the registry should consider which new services to adopt and also how to improve on existing service process. Also one needs to consider the following:- how existing services can be repackaged to enhance services; how to alter marketing targets and approaches; how to improve coordination and responsiveness to customers; how decisions can be made faster; how delays can be

eliminated; how customer staff relationship can be improved and so on.

**Step 9:-** Report plan of action to management. This involves communication of the results of the registry staff investigation and observations to management including what they intend to do to improve service processes/operations, develop new services or increase market share in terms of customers and so on. Competitive intelligence does not only involve gathering of information on competitors but stimulate action.

**Step 10:-** Continuous monitoring of competition. Because the business environment has become very competitive today, the purpose of CI is not merely to gather information on competitors but to use the intelligence constantly gathered from time to time to transform the private university registry, create new services, establish new alliances, change the way our information services are delivered while building in the flexibility needed to make fast changes.

### Conclusion/Summary

The quality of information service delivery by the private university registry is very important for the survival of these institutions of higher learning because service quality is an antecedent factor of customer satisfaction and retention which is very essential for the growth and success of private universities. Due to the competitive environment that the private universities has found itself in terms of struggle for revenue, dwindling enrolment and striving to meet up with staff salaries and other major expenses, there is need to consider using a strategic approach which will help improve the services rendered by the Nigerian private university

registry which interfaces with students, staff and the general public so as to gain competitive advantage over competitors. The ratio of the number of private universities currently operating in Nigeria and others preparing to join is relatively high when compared to the number of potential customers (students) available and though private higher institutions are viewed to be more receptive to students, there is need to employ competitive intelligence process to reposition themselves in the emerging competitive economy.

### Recommendations

Using the competitive intelligence approach or processes helps institutions recognize and identify where they are, their performance, their competitors and why their competitors tend to be more successful but it does not end there, rather, the private university registry needs to strategize to make the information services they render excellent, attractive and of good quality over and above that of their competitors. Such strategies could include:-

- 1) Regular training sessions for registry staff and orientation for new staff.
- 2) Good and effective marketing of information services
- 3) Repackaging of marketing strategy for information services
- 4) Constantly reminding (internal and external seminars, workshop) staff of the importance of good and excellent staff-customer relations.
- 5) Use of user friendly information technology to enhance quality information service delivery in admissions, registration,

grading, learning, graduation, and interaction with alumni.

- 6) Recruitment of competent and qualified professionals to handle information systems in the registry. They must be trustworthy and have high integrity in guarantying the security of information kept with them.
- 7) The registry staff must be trained on how to respond quickly with humility to the needs of its customers.
- 8) There should be regular meetings of departmental unit heads to know what is done and what needs to be done and the way forward.
- 9) Invest in professional development of the current registry staff.
- 10) Have email communication with present and past (graduated) students to be able to meet their needs effectively
- 11) A continuous evaluation of work processes or service rendered is also import.

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